



# PERMACULTURE AS RELOCALISATION

*This short piece was written late 2005 for the book **Relocalise Now** by Julian Darley and others, published by New Society Publishers in press July 2006. It followed my return from teaching on the west coast of North America where Relocalisation had become the buzz word in the peak oil and permaculture activist networks as an idea that could encompass many of our strategies and appeal to a very broad audience. It continues the theme of widening the popular understanding of permaculture and the design principles as universal ones for the energy descent era.*



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The imminent peaking of global oil supply suggests a permanent decline in the energy available to support humanity. This energy descent future will demand ways of thinking and organisation that are fundamentally different from those that guided the continuous energy ascent era since European cultures conquered the Americas and began to tap fossil fuels. Peak oil promises to make “living with less”, a non-negotiable reality faster than the alarming evidence of emerging climatic catastrophe.

Most people who have seriously considered the energy descent future recognise that it will lead to, amongst other fundamental changes, the faltering and reversal of globalisation. A revitalisation, in some form, of local economy, community and politics should follow. This structural change reflects a deeper level of thinking and action than imagining which fuel source or sources we will use in the future.

Permaculture is a design system for living and land use in the energy descent era. It emerged during the first oil shock era (1970's)<sup>1</sup> and has steadily grown into a worldwide movement of practitioners, designers and activists. Permaculture strategies range from using local organic wastes to create fertile food gardens, or making use of microclimate to grow a greater diversity of crops, to natural buildings heated by the sun, or collecting rainwater and reusing grey water, as well as local currencies and community supported agriculture. All of these examples can all be thought of as localisation strategies<sup>2</sup>.

Permaculture design starts with getting our own house (and especially garden) in order, then making the connections across the back fence, around the neighbourhood and throughout our networks. Instead of a focus on what is wrong with the world and what “they” should do, permaculture design and activism focuses on what we can do to live more self reliant lives, with less dependence on distant and centralised sources of water, food and fuel. Rather than a survivalist strategy for holding onto essential resources, permaculture harvests wastes and generates renewable abundance that will support the modest needs of self, kin and community.

Systems theory suggests that these micro scale solutions that grow to modest economies of scale, but spread like weeds, are more likely pathways to successful relocalisation than the contraction and breakup of mega systems although that may also make a contribution.

While permaculture solutions vary greatly depending on the conditions and culture, they are all informed by universal design principles that collectively generate localised solutions to ecologic, economic and social needs. For example, the design principle **Use Small and Slow Solutions** demands we look to resources and opportunities which tend to be localised and distributed rather than global and centralised. The principle **Use and Value Diversity** encourages a variety of solutions from place to place. The principle **Apply Self Regulation and Accept Feedback** demands a move to more self reliant ways of living that take account of natural limitations. The principle **Obtain A Yield** requires us to extend

1 Mollison, B. & Holmgren, D. *Permaculture One* Corgi 1978

2 For the scope of permaculture design solutions see Mollison, B. *Permaculture: A Designers Manual* Tagari 1988

financial literacy to energy literacy so we know which parts of a system are providing the goods. Permaculture design principles combine the common sense of our grandparents with the latest understandings from systems ecology<sup>3</sup>.

Oil has been the quintessential global energy solution and the design thinking developed in the energy ascent era leads us to believe in the next singular and global energy solution and to dismiss solutions that, by their nature, cannot be applied on such a scale. This apparently self evident truth from the passing era is now a dangerous mindset that blinds us to the myriad of small local solutions and how they fit together to make for a prosperous way down from the peak of fossil energy. Permaculture helps us find and create those local solutions. At the same time it provides the thinking tools to detect the red herrings, false paths, dead ends and “Trojan horses” we will face while charting our descent of the energy mountain over the next few decades.

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<sup>3</sup> For an explanation of systems thinking and design principles of permaculture see Holmgren, D ***Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability*** Holmgren Design Services 2002. For a summary of the book see Article 36.